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## **Digital Learning Advisory Council**

### Meeting Minutes

*April 26, 2021*

### **Attendees**

- Nick Caruso — Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE)
- Doug Casey — Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- Jonathan Costa — EdAdvance
- Larry Covino — Bristol Adult Education
- Andy DePalma — EASTCONN
- Karen Kaplan — Hamden Public Schools
- Greg Mcverry — Southern Connecticut State University
- Jim Mindek — Connecticut Technical High School System
- Karen Skudlarek — University of Connecticut
- Josh Smith — Region 15 Public Schools
- Jim Spafford — Manchester Adult Education
- Chinma Uche — CREC Aerospace Academy & CT CS Teachers Association
- Scott Zak — Connecticut State Colleges and Universities

### **Agenda**

- Thought Exchange: Soliciting Input on Post-Pandemic Learning Best Practices
- Federal Funding and Programs
- Open Education Resources: Timing and Collections

### **Welcome**

Nick Caruso, Chair of the Digital Learning Advisory Council, welcomed members and called the meeting to order just after 1:30 PM. He invited Doug Casey to introduce the first topic, regarding feedback on best practices in teaching and learning.

### **Thought Exchange**

Doug greeted members of the Advisory Council and provided a brief summary of the group's recommendation that the Commission gather input on practices that schools and universities adopted to support remote learning, specifically through the Thought Exchange platform. Jonathan Costa originally offered this suggestion during the February 5, 2021 Advisory Council meeting (see [meeting minutes, page 4](#)), with the intent of identifying promising practices to continue after the safe return to classrooms. Doug asked Jonathan to provide the group with additional background on Thought



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Exchange and recommendations for developing the specific language in the question to pose through the platform.

Jonathan described Thought Exchange as a community-engagement company whose primary offering is a platform for gathering and assessing input on open-ended topics. The platform differs from traditional survey tools, in that invited participants can respond to the prompt and then rate the responses of other contributors. EdAdvance has used Thought Exchange for five years and, most recently, used the platform on behalf of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) three times over the past year, with one prompt garnering 1.2 million responses. Thought Exchange uses artificial intelligence to strip offensive and personally identifiable responses and to assist with the review and categorization of large numbers of responses.

Doug thanked Jonathan for the background and welcomed Advisory Council members to craft the specific prompt. Jonathan offered the following question as a starting point: "What practices/innovations that supported digital learning during the pandemic do you believe are worth keeping as common practice as we return to in-person schooling?" He clarified the objective of creating a simple, highly accessible question to invite all members of the education community to respond, including K – 12, higher education, and adult students and teachers; parents; and administrators.

Greg Mcverry raised concerns about access to the submitted data. Jonathan clarified that participants would need a code to enter the Thought Exchange to submit ideas and rank others. While they could see subsets of submitted ideas, they would not have access to the entire data set, and certainly not see any personally identifiable information. Not even administrators (in this case, EdAdvance) can see information about individual participants.

A healthy discussion followed with several modifications to the prompt. The language became more simple, positive, and actionable, given the desire of the group to elicit broad-based feedback. For example, members agreed to remove the term "innovative," given that successful practices may not be new but simply effective. Karen Skudlarek and Josh Smith suggested the removal of the term "digital learning" to encourage responses not related to core academics but to other facets of school, such as student supports, family outreach, and even creative approaches to serving meals on campus and in school. The result of these discussions led to a final prompt as follows:

What about school during the pandemic is worth keeping as we return to in-person education?

Larry Covino offered a Spanish translation, provided by one of his colleagues:

¿ La escuela durante la pandemia vale la pena mantener ahora que regresamos a la educación presencial?



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Following the collective development of the prompt language, the group discussed outreach to members of the education community. To elicit feedback from K – 12, higher education, adult learning, and workforce audiences, the Advisory Council members drafted an initial list of partners to promote the Thought Exchange prompt. The group did debate whether to include employers and business associations, which have a stake in the quality of public education for workforce preparedness. Members agreed to share the prompt with these groups, casting a wide net for input among all education stakeholders. Doug concluded the discussion by thanking the group and, specifically, Jonathan for introducing the topic and facilitating the initiative.

### **Federal Funding and Programs**

Given the concerns of Advisory Council members to ensure access to online learning opportunities for all students, Doug provided a brief overview of forthcoming, federally funded broadband programs.

Through a national fund of \$3.1B, the [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#) (EBB) provides up to \$50 per month to offset the cost of Internet to qualifying households (e.g., National School Lunch Program eligible, Medicaid eligible, Pell Grant recipients, etc.). He noted the session from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) last week for Connecticut as well as the informational resources posted to the Commission's Home Connectivity Web page ([www.bit.ly/CT\\_Home\\_BB](http://www.bit.ly/CT_Home_BB)).

Unlike EBB, which will serve all qualifying households for any purpose, the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) is an education program. It should function as an extension of the E-rate program for schools and libraries. The \$7.1B allocation for ECF will help connect students and library patrons at home and may pay for past investments in connectivity. Doug noted that, as with EBB, the ECF program is still in development by the FCC, with formal rules expected in May.

Finally, districts can expect to receive funding later this spring through the American Rescue Plan to assist with COVID-related education concerns, including learning loss, safety and mitigation, and technology to support remote and blended learning. Connecticut will receive \$1.1B, at least 90 percent of which will go to local education agencies (i.e., school districts).

Jim Mindek asked about filing reimbursements through ECF. Doug noted that the FCC has yet to finalize the rules and procedures of the program and that he would be updating the Home Connectivity page with information for districts and libraries. Jim also asked about the continuation of the Everybody Learns program and the likelihood of renewing data provisions for the mobile hotspots for the 2021 – 22 school year. Doug shared that the State is assessing the option of continuing to pay for home broadband through Everybody Learns, in light of significant new funding, as noted above. He



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emphasized the significant funding coming to Connecticut at the state and local level and wanted to ensure that the education community maximizes those programs before leveraging State-level discretionary funds.

### **Open Education Resources: Timing and Collections**

The last topic of the meeting included updates and timing on the forthcoming launch of [Go Open CT](#), the State's open education resources site. Doug noted the importance of providing equitable access to high-quality learning materials across schools and universities and the opportunity that the OER site would provide in supporting the creation, curation, and sharing of digital learning materials.

Work continues to import state and national academic standards, such as the Common Core, for site users to tag their content collections. The portal will have state-level governance rules as well as local, institutional controls. Administrators at schools and universities will have the ability to share or keep private the lessons, units, courses, and other digital learning materials developed within their own institution.

He asked for feedback on the previously shared content collections, including K – 12 sources such as Illustrative Math and Khan Academy as well as higher education materials from programs such as OpenStax. Members of Go Open CT will be able to access nearly 7,000 learning materials from more than 30 content collections when the site launches in August. Larry encouraged the inclusion of adult learning collections such as those from the State of Kentucky. Doug welcomed the suggestion and requested further information on these and other quality-aligned collections.

### **Adjournment**

Nick thanked the Advisory Council members for their time and insights. He encouraged members to reach out to him or any member of the Commission with ideas or concerns tied to digital learning. He concluded the meeting at approximately 3:00 PM.